DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 295 CG 018 493

AUTHOR McGann, John; Strauss, Jane
TITLE Building a Network for Children of Divorce.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Social Workers (New Orleans, LA, January 31-February 3, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Children; Class Activities; *Divorce; Elementary Secondary Education; Intervention; Parent Teacher Cooperation; *School Activities; *School Social Workers; *Social Support Groups; Teacher Workshops
IDENTIFIERS Parent Teacher Association

ABSTRACT

Divorce is a complicated situation, requiring multifaceted interventions and supports. This paper describes a program designed to enhance the ability of social structures to support children experiencing the impact of parental separation and divorce. The program is a four-part, school-based intervention aimed at educating significant adults regarding the expectable responses of children to the impact of parental separation and divorce. Although in-school discussion groups for children of divorce are not unusual, such programs, while useful, do not seem adequate if conducted in isolation from the rest of the child's environment. This program was developed in response to the recognition of the very complex needs of children of divorce as they interact with their families, the schools they attend and the communities in which they live. While a time-limited structured group whose focus is the mastery of issues surrounding marital rupture is an essential part of any program for this population, other types of interventions are equally important. This program springs from an ecological perspective which views the child as an integral member of interlocking societal institutions which both influence and react to his presence. It consists of teacher workshops, Parent Teacher Association sponsored presentations, classroom meetings, and time-limited structured groups for children of divorce. (Author/NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED261295

Building a Network for Children of Divorce

John McGann, M.S.W.
Jane Strauss, M.S.W.

CG018493

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jane B. Strauss

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ABSTRACT: BUILDING A NETWORK FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

This program is designed to enhance the ability of social structures to support children experiencing the impact of parental separation and divorce. The program is a four-part, school-based intervention aimed at educating significant adults regarding the expectable responses of children to the impact of parental separation and divorce. Although in-school discussion groups for children of divorce are not unusual, such programs, while useful, do not seem adequate if conducted in isolation from the rest of the child's environment.

This program was developed in response to the recognition of divorce as they interact with their families, the schools they attend and the communities in which they live. While a time limited structured group whose focus is the mastery of issues surrounding marital rupture is an essential part of any program for this population, other types of interventions are equally important.

This program springs from an ecological perspective which views the child as an integral member of interlocking societal institutions which both influence and react to his presence. It consists of teacher workshops, PTA sponsored presentations, classroom meetings, and time-limited structured groups for children of divorce.

Jane Strauss, ACSW
School Social Worker
Hamden Public Schools
1450 Whitney Avenue
Hamden, Ct. 06517

John McGann, MSW
Community Mental Health Specialist
Hamden Mental Health
Putnam Avenue
Hamden, Ct. 06517

The increasing phenomenon of marital rupture and its impact upon children's ability to learn has been amply documented (3, 8). While it is recognized that children do not leave their worries at home when they arrive at school, educational personnel face the dilemma of whether they should reasonably be expected to deal with this issue given the demands of time and funding. In the authors' view, the school is the most logical place to provide service since it is a part of the child's naturally occurring network. Although in-school programs have been developed to address the needs of school age children, (1, 6) these programs, while useful, do not seem adequate if conducted in isolation from the rest of the child's environment.

This paper describes a school social work program developed in response to the recognition of the very complex needs of children of divorce as they interact with their families, the schools they attend, and the communities in which they live. While a time limited structured group whose focus is the mastery of issues surrounding marital rupture is an essential part of any program for this population, other types of interventions are equally important.

This program springs from an ecological perspective which views the child as an integral member of interlocking societal institutions which both influence and react to his presence.(4) Each part of the interlocking system meets the child's needs. The family provides emotional support and stability in addition to providing for the child's physical well-being. The school

offers the child contact with peers as well as broadening and enriching his intellectual pursuits. Other institutions provide the means to meet other needs: religious, recreational, medical and social. When any part of this network stops functioning, the whole system reacts to the imbalance. Since the time of marital rupture is a time of "diminished capacity to parent" (8) clearly other parts of the child's environment must respond or this imbalance will persist. At the present time, the response of other institutions to the increased needs of children of divorce can be viewed as negative action which reinforces the child's sense of isolation. Unlike other life crisis situations such as a death or a natural disaster, friends do not tend to "rally round" a divorced family nor do the other expectable supports such as the clergy. (8) School systems often do not know about this crisis until long after it has occurred since children and parents often feel ashamed. The child's network has essentially collapsed.

The thesis of this program is that the school is the logical place to remobilize the network toward balance of the child's ecological system. The school fulfills this role for several reasons: 1) for the latency age child, the school is the major realm of activity - "a second home" and a logical place to turn for support,(2) school personnel have the opportunity to work with children very early on, when prevention rather than remediation is possible. The large numbers of children of divorce seen by mental health professionals,both in and outside of the schools, attest to the need for prevention. Approximately 40%

of the children in the authors' caseloads are from this population, (3) since all children come to school, the school is a part of the child's naturally occurring network. By dealing with these issues within the school rather than in a Child Guidance Clinic or other mental health setting, there is validation of the fact that what may appear as "crazy" behavior is in fact not pathological but rather an appropriate response to the reality of his experience. At the same time, contact with familiar people in a familiar setting adds reassurance of continuity when the child is experiencing so many disruptions.

Much attention has been paid to the concept of networking as a useful tool in helping people in crisis. Uri Rueveni in his book Networking for Families in Crisis, states..."our lives, well-being and ability to function on a daily basis depends on the quality and adequacy of our social support systems, and on our ability to mobilize these systems during crisis."(7) School age children are unable to mobilize the system without the assistance of adults. When parents, who serve as the natural intervenors into the network for children, are unable to do this because of diminished ability to parent, the school personnel must assist the school age child in intervening into the network.

This program utilizes a multi-faceted approach, whose purpose is to relink the support system on behalf of the child and restore balance. The program consists of teacher workshops, PTA sponsored presentations, classroom meetings, and time-limited structured groups for children of divorce. Expanding the network logically means more active outreach into other

parts of the network and the larger community.

TEACHER WORKSHOP

Since the school is one of the major parts of the child's natural support system, it is extremely important to sensitize teaching personnel to the expectable distress which results from the dissolution of a marriage. A major purpose of the in-service workshop for teachers is to provide information regarding the divorcing experience for children as well as for their parents. School personnel need to understand the sources of restlessness, of aggression, of sadness and worry. They also need to be aware of parental issues which can lead to dysfunction. Without knowledge of these issues, it is easy to misinterpret a child's behavior and to question parental responsibility. A second purpose of the workshop is to make overt the natural supportive role that teachers provide to latency age children. Children of this age look to adults for acceptance, direction, and approval. Teachers have classically taken on the role of second parent. Their relationship to children of divorce is essentially the same. Given the statistical frequency of divorce, it is important that school systems assess the content of their materials, expand perspectives and definitions of family and increase their acceptance of divorced parents, custodial and non-custodial. The final purpose of the workshop is to gain support for the rest of the program, especially small group and classroom interventions.

Before one can look at the impact of the dissolution of a marriage to all parties, one needs to look at the power of the image of the "ideal" family. The workshop begins with a discussion of this myth. It is also important to consider the impact of stress on functioning. Teachers are asked to self-administer a stress test in order to reinforce the message that divorce is not an isolated event but brings with it a number of stressful changes.

Information presented in the workshop focuses on the divorcing milieu as well as the kinds of expectable responses of children to the experience as based on the research of Wallerstein and Kelly. (8) The emphasis is developmental in order to highlight the appropriateness of children's reactions. In addition, the kinds of changes which impact upon the child's life: establishment of two households, loss of a parent, parental pre-occupation, continuing or escalated conflict, and possible change of lifestyle and peer group are also discussed.

The final segment of the workshop presents strategies for teachers in the classroom, for communicating with both parents, and guidelines for referral to mental health personnel.

PTA WORKSHOP

Workshops presented to parents under the auspices of the Parent Teacher Association were designed to create an awareness of the school community regarding the needs of children of divorce and their families as well as support for in-school services.

The workshop is particularly designed to reach out to those who may be experiencing marital upheaval and to educate them regarding expectable responses. For intact families, this workshop addresses issues of reactions of their children to friend's divorces as well as providing information in advance of statistically expectable divorces. In addition, the workshop seeks to encourage closer linkage between school and home as it relates to family matters and to establish a more accepting environment for individual's experiencing separation and divorce.

The content of the workshop is similar to that of tne teacher workshop in that it examines the primary and secondary stresses of divorce on children and their families. Specific strategies for dealing with these issues within the family are suggested. Particular emphasis is put on the kinds of questions children need answered: living arrangements, visitation schedules, some explanation regarding the divorce, and that parents would have wished that the family could have stayed together. Boundary issues are also stressed: children must not be confidantes, should not be drawn into the conflict, must be helped to resume their own developmental process.

Information regarding custodial and non-custodial parental rights are presented. An important thesis of the program is that, if at all possible, the child still needs both parent's involvement in their major sphere of life, school.

STRUCTURED CHILDREN'S GROUP

The structured group is primarily designed for children who have experienced the crisis of their parents' separation or divorce within the last year. The groups are also beneficial to children for whom the divorce is an ongoing or recurrent crisis, or an unresolved issue. For example, it can provide support to children whose parents have continued to engage in conflict. It can also address issues that have resurfaced in reaction to a parent's plan to remarry.

A child whose parents are in the process of divorce often experiences isolation and shame. He feels that he is the only one in this particular situation and may well experience emotions and mood swings which he does not understand but which may make him feel "crazy". He needs a vehicle to share concerns, to gain knowledge about divorce, and to master, through understanding, problem-solving techniques in order to deal with such issues as visitations and parental dating.

Like adults, children benefit from feeling part of a cohesive group with others with similar kinds of problems. If other children are experiencing the same situations and feelings, then perhaps he is not so crazy after all. Since parental consent is required for participation in the group and since there is a parent support group connected to the children's group, children are essentially given permission to talk about the stress they are experiencing. It becomes an appropriate place to bring concerns, thus reducing the demands placed on teaching personnel.

A support group for children held within the school has many benefits. As noted before, the school is a major part of the child's network. Peers and the setting are familiar. Access to the leader and to other group members continue outside of the group and after its termination. Since the program is held as a part of the regular school day, the normality of the concerns which often interfere with the child's ability to learn is reinforced. Again, the regular day alleviates an additional stress on already overburdened single parents to provide transportation.

Important criteria for group participation are a child's cognitive ability and his reality testing skills. Other factors such as a child's anxiety level and aggressiveness also should be weighed regarding inclusion in the group.

Since girls tend to be more verbal while boys of this age are more physically active, the group should ideally include both. The groups are divided according to developmental criteria into 6-9 year olds, and 9-12 year olds. Between 4-8 members is an ideal number.

To ensure continuity in the event of a leader's absence, groups should be co-lead if possible. Two leaders also enables one to observe reactions while the other leads an activity or discussion. A male and female leader is ideal since it can provide the opportunity to observe transferential issues.

The format of a time-limited rather than an open-ended group provides the opportunity to deal with issues of termination and loss. In order to ensure clarity of this issue, the

ending of the group should not coincide with the end of the school year. A one-year follow-up meeting provides continuity and gives children an opportunity to take stock of their mastery of the divorce issue.

Each group meeting consists of the three predictable parts: 1) warm up and sharing time; 2) an activity geared to the discussion; 3) snack and closing ritual.

The purpose, content, and sequence of the group sessions remain constant but techniques and materials vary according to the developmental tasks of the group and the personal style of the leader. Although designed for latency age and prepubescent children, the group agenda can be adapted to address the needs of the adolescent.

PARENT SUPPORT GROUP

As an adjunct to the children's support group, the parent group meets three times. Groups are offered to custodial and non-custodial parents separately. These groups: provide information about the content of the structured groups for children, inform parents of community resource, discuss referrals to community agencies, examine single parent issues in dealing with the school, and provide a forum for discussing specific concerns regarding their children.

CLASSROOM INTERVENTION

Classroom intervention, with the aid of the genogram as a visual technique, is designed to expand children's knowledge of different family styles. A genogram enables the child to

visualize his family structure and his place in it. The use of symbols allows the child to perceive a range of relationships in a generalized and less threatening manner. It legitimizes his connections with significant persons in his environment.

Children experiencing parental separation or divorce feel extremely isolated and that they have lost their family. Use of the genogram can reaffirm their family connections. If there are other children of divorce in the class, classroom sharing of genograms reduces the sense of being the only one whose parents have separated.

For children from intact families, the opportunity to understand that families do continue to exist even after divorce can be extremely reassuring in this time of increasing marital separation and divorce.

For all children, the use of the genogram provides the opportunity to visualize the range of different family structures existing in society today.

For teachers, the genogram provides a tool for dealing with potentially sensitive material in an objective and non-judgmental manner. Again, it provides a technique to enable teachers to demonstrate graphically the wide variety of family styles.

Besides the use of the genogram, there are a number of films that can be shown in the classroom to stimulate discussion relative to divorce and separation.

A review of material in classroom pertaining to family styles is also helpful in expanding student understanding of different types of families. Besides reading materials, story presentations of different family structure could well be integrated into social studies when teaching about different cultures and periods in history. For example, the size and structure of colonial families was very different than families in western cultures today as are the structures of Oriental and African families.

Reaction to the Program

Response to the program has been positive. Evaluations, while favorable, were largely anecdotal. Parents reported that children were more able to discuss issues about the divorce. One child had been unwilling to mention the topic and acted as if nothing had changed in his life. By the end of the group, his mother reported a significant decrease in denial. Children reported surprise at other children's inclusion in the group and seemed to gain comfort from that knowledge. (If he's divorced, I must be okay). They demonstrated an increasing ability to verbalize comfortably their concerns about changes in their lives. Students offered to share their experience and knowledge with new groups when they were formed.

Teachers and parents reported an increased understanding of children's reactions to the divorce. Communication increased between home and school. There appeared to be an increased

effort to address the needs of non-custodial parents in the schools where presentations were made. As might be expected, the connections established with families and the leaders through the groups remain as support that has been utilized as needed. In addition, parents involved in these groups were receptive to referral for additional support services for themselves or their children.

The impact of the teacher presentation was made apparent in an unexpected way. School personnel who had personally experienced divorce took the opportunity to seek out the presenters to discuss their personal reactions and resultant changes in perspective.

Children had a very positive reaction to the use of genograms in the classroom. They found this way of graphing families fun. It seemed to provide opportunity for discussion of different family styles, living arrangements, and relationships. One child audibly sighed with relief when a symbol could be provided for a father's live-in girlfriend.

Conclusion

Divorce is a complicated situation, requiring multi-faceted interventions and supports. This program has attempted to intervene on a number of levels, but it is school based. Logically, to provide more integrated support, other parts of the family's network need to be engaged. An expansion of

support requires a more active outreach into the community. Other parts of the social system need to be sensitized to the effects of divorce on children and their role in providing support. For example, pediatricians can offer parents suggestions of constructive ways to talk with children about the divorce; lawyers can advise their clients about their right in access to the school; and, clergymen can be more active in their inclusion of divorced families into activities of the religious community.

References

1. Cantor, D. 1977,"School-Based Groups for Children of Divorce". J. Div. 1:183-197.

2. Erikson, E.H. 1963, Childhood and Society. New York, Norton.

3. Francke, L.B. 1983,Growing Up Divorced. New York, Simon & Schuster.

4. Germain, Carel. 1979,Social Work Practice, People and Perspectives: an Ecological Perspective. New York, Columbia University Press.

5. Holmes & Rahe.

6. Kalter, N., Picker, J. & Lesovitz, M. 1984,"School-Based Developmental Facilitation Groups for Children of Divorce." American J. of Orthopsychiatry. S4:613-623.

7. Rueveni, Uri. Intervention Strategies with Families as Social Networks. New York, Human Sciences Press.

8. Wallerstein, Judith S., Kelly, Joan B., 1980, Surviving the Breakup. How Parents and Children Cope with Divorce, New York. Basic Books.